

FIVE GIFTS OF THE GURUS

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INTRODUCTION

A student of religious history is amazed at the originality, spiritual experience, vision and achievements of Guru Nanak. The Sikh Gurus during the course of about two and a half centuries gave us inimitable demonstrations of spiritual life and numerous invaluable gifts. In the present essay, we shall confine ourselves to only five of them. These gifts, besides being fundamentally essential for the spiritual growth of man, are unparalleled in their originality. As briefly as possible we shall describe them.

THE FIRST GIFT

The very first gift Guru Nanak gave us was that of a whole-life or *miri-piri* ideology. Ignorant persons some times confuse the Guru's system with salvation religions or dichotomous systems. Since its known history, the Indian soil had not known of a whole-life system. The Hindu systems, Bhakti system, Buddhism or Jainism are all dichotomous because the world is considered *mithya*, an entanglement or a suffering; and, for that matter, withdrawal, *sanyasa*, asceticism, monasticism and celibacy are the chief spiritual values. In the Vedic systems, the hierarchy of the caste system is a sanctioned division, which according to the Gurus, and the principle of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, is a negation of all religious values. In its history of over three thousand years, India had not known a whole-life religious system. In fact, asceticism, which is the hallmark of a dichotomous system, is considered the special Indian contribution to the world culture. This being the religious, social and cultural background, the very conception of a whole-life system, much less its growth, in the Indian soil appeared impossible. Yet, the first miracle Guru Nanak performed was to give us the gift of a whole-life spiritual system, which, we find, has its values entirely different from those of a dichotomous system. Before we proceed further to define the Guru's system and gifts, let us just indicate the basic differences between a whole-life and a dichotomous or a salvation system.

In a dichotomous system the spiritual seeker withdraws himself from life in the empirical world. He remains unconcerned with its

responsibilities and problems because he believes that life in the world is an entanglement and a suffering. Hence, the goal is personal salvation, merger, Nirvana or a blissful calm and peace. The methodology and values of this path are also different. The seeker resorts to otherworldliness, monasticism, asceticism, celibacy, pacifism and personal piety. In short, the path and values of spiritual life are entirely different from the path and values of empirical life. In order to illustrate the point, we might indicate the views of St. Augustine, a distinguished theologian of Christianity who writes that the 'City of God' or the path of spiritual life, is quite different from life in the world, which he calls the 'City of Man'. "Augustine's 'City of God' (p.426) attacked both Christians who expected the world to get better and pagans with a cyclic view of history. Augustine did not believe that the spread of Christianity would ensure political and economic improvement. The 'earthly city' of self-will would continue to exist amidst the rise and fall of states and empires."¹ This view is typical of all dichotomous or salvation systems. In India, since times immemorial dichotomy had been accepted by all Indian systems, whether Upanishadic, Vedic, Vaishnavic, Buddhistic, Jainic or Yogic. *Sanyasa*, withdrawal, asceticism or Bhikshuhood was the path to follow with *moksha*, merger, or Nirvana as the goal.

Guru Nanak was the first prophet in the East who gave us a radically new path by rejecting dichotomy and its system of goal, methodology and values. It is because of this dichotomy that the evils of untouchability, poverty, degradation, invasions, slavery and oppression could continue in India unabated. Instead, he emphasized that life was real and an opportunity for spiritual progress. Spirituality had to be expressed in life. In his system, wordly life without being informed by the force of spirituality is barren, and spiritual life without its expression in the world is just sterile. Therefore, at one stroke, he rejected *sanyasa*, otherworldliness, celibacy, asceticism and monasticism, and in two simple and clear couplets he laid down a new goal and methodology of his whole-life system, combining intimately the life of the spirit with the life of the world. He stated that the Benevolent Creator was working the world with His Graceful Will.² Therefore, the only way to be a truthful person (*sachiar*) was to 'carry out the Will of God',³ and 'life was a game of love', in which one should be ready to lay down, without wavering, one's life,⁴ if need be.

This new ideology is, thus, the first gift Guru Nanak gave us. He changed the earlier tradition of dichotomous systems. Another important difference between a whole-life and a dichotomous system is that whereas the latter is a system of personal salvation, the former is essentially a societal system with clearly laid down social responsibilities. A whole-life system has nothing to do with Bhakti, Yogic and mystic systems that are quietist, and aim at personal salvation, without the acceptance of social responsibilities. It is, therefore, due to their ignorance of religious theologies and classification, that some Western and Indian scholars confuse Sikhism with Bhakti, Yogic, Vaishnavic or other quietist religious systems.

THE SECOND GIFT

The second uncommon gift of Guru Nanak is the laying down of a complete ideology. Abstractions of philosophers apart, no prophet has indicated and emphasized the principles and values of his system with greater completeness, detail, logic and clarity than Guru Nanak.

The first principle or value is that since God's Will is working in the world, and since life is 'a game of love,' love has to be expressed in this world. This *ipso facto* rejects a life of withdrawal, *sanyasa* and asceticism.

The second value, which, in a way, is a corollary of the first value, is the principle of full participation in life and total social responsibility.

The third, as following from the value of love, is the principle of equality. Guru Nanak says, "One cannot be a Yogi by mere wishing; real Yoga lies in treating all alike."⁵ Again, in pursuance of this principle, Guru Nanak was the first man of God to proclaim equality of man and woman. He says, "Why call woman impure, when without woman their would be none,"⁶ and "It is she who gives birth to great persons."⁷

Fourth is the value, or the importance of activity, deeds, and moral life. Love is the mother of all values, and love is dynamic. Guru Nanak says, "It is by our deeds that we are assessed in His Court."⁸ "It is by our deeds that we become near or away from God."⁹ Considering that God's Will is Altruistic, it is Guru Nanak who emphasizes the spiritual value of moral deeds, when he says, "Everything is lower than truth, higher still is truthful conduct."¹⁰

The fifth value is that as spiritual life is a game of love, Guru Nanak emphasizes the necessity and value of work and production. For, life and those whom man loves, have to be sustained and supported. Again, it is Guru Nanak who lays down, "The person incapable of earning his living, gets his ears split (becomes a Nath Yogi) and turns a mendicant. He calls himself a guru or a saint. Do not look upto him, nor touch his feet. He alone knows the way who earns his living and shares his earnings with others."¹¹ Some may observe that we are stretching too much the implication of a hymn which just condemns the ritualistic living of Nath Yogis. But, the value of work, laid down by Guru Nanak, is extremely original and revolutionary in its import and meaning because no prophet had earlier stressed the clear significance and logic of a whole-life system. Let us quote Huxley, who in our present century, understood the importance and the intimate link between 'love' and 'work'. He writes, in his letter to Humphrey Osmond, "The Indians say the thought and the thinker, and the thing thought about, are one, and then of the way in which this unowned experience becomes something belonging to me; and then not me any more and a kind of *satchit-ananda*, at one moment without *karuna* or charity (how odd that the Vedantists say nothing about love), I had an inkling of both kinds of Nirvana - the love-less being, consciousness, bliss and the one with love and, above all, a sense that one can never love enough."¹²

Further, again, during his visionary experience of the 'Pure Light' he speaks to his wife, Laura.

Laura: If you can immobilize-it? What do you mean?

Aldous: You can immobilize it, but it is not the real thing, you can remain for eternity in this thing at the exclusion of love and work.

Laura: But that thing should be love and work.

Aldous (with emphasis): Exactly! I mean this is why it is wrong. Staying in this ecstatic consciousness and cutting oneself off from participation and commitment to the rest of the world - this is perfectly expressed today in powerful slang, in the phrase 'dropping out.' (continuing) It completely denies the facts, it is morally wrong, and finally, of course, absolutely catastrophic.

Huxley's wife writes: "'Absolutely Catastrophic', these two words are said with most earnest and profound conviction. The voice

is not raised, but each letter is as if sculptured on a shining block of Carrare marble, and remains sculptured on the soul of any one who hears it. It is a definitive statement: One cannot isolate oneself from one's fellows and environment, for there is no private salvation; one might 'get stuck' even in the Pure Light instead of infusing it in 'Love and Work,' which is the direct solution of every one's life, right here and now. Love and work, if I should put it in a nutshell, is the essence of Aldous's life. I could not find a more precise way of saying it."¹³

As in the case of the principle of equality with regard to woman, the close relation between love and work for sustenance of life is an important spiritual value stressed by Guru Nanak which, he felt, is a necessary corollary of the value of love or a religious man's life.

Similarly, sharing of production and wealth is the sixth value or a corollary of leading a life of love. Guru Nanak, as is shown by the story of Malik Bhago and Lalo, was against exploitation of the weak and accumulation of wealth. It is stated, "God's bounty belongs to all, but men grab it for themselves."¹⁴ "Man gathers riches by making others miserable,"¹⁵ and "Riches cannot be gathered without sin, but these do not keep company after death." In the system of Guru Nanak, "Work, production and sharing" is a new principle stressed by him for the seeker of spiritual progress.

Earlier religions, whether in the East or the West, laid stress primarily on alms-giving or '*daan*'. But, Guru Nanak called work and sharing a religious responsibility and an essential value. The Fifth Nanak made the '*daswandh*' contribution a religious duty.¹⁷ The important difference between the attribute of alms-giving and insistence on work and sharing is that whereas, in the first case, it is a personal virtue in a salvation religion, in the case of sharing or *daswandh* it is a social duty in a societal religion. For, this value creates in the society a sense of cohesion, identity and social responsibility. Thus, in the spiritual field it is a new contribution in the value system, which clearly distinguishes the whole-life or societal character of Guru Nanak's system from the earlier salvation or Bhakti systems in or outside India.

The seventh value which Guru Nanak emphasized, and which is obviously necessary in a system of love, is the social responsibility of ensuring, for those one loves, peace and protection against injustice

and oppression. Again, it is Guru Nanak who emphasizes the importance and necessity of this value of confrontation with the oppressor. Evil is a fact of life, and quite often it is the greatest in the political field or in the functioning of states. In the Babar Vani, Guru Nanak condemns the sinful invasion of Babar motivated by lust for territory and riches. In fact, as the prophet of a whole-life religion, Guru Nanak critically points out every dark spot in the religious, social and political life of the country. On the point of oppression of the weak, he says, "If the strong maul the strong, I grieve not, but if a lion attacks the sheep, the master becomes answerable."¹⁸ This hymn is of basic importance in the Guru's theology. In his system God is the True Emperor. Since injustice in His Realm does not conform with His Order, it becomes the spiritual responsibility of *ihgurmukh* (God-man) and the seeker to ensure justice and confront injustice. Guru Nanak makes his position on this issue very clear. He says, "God is the Destroyer of the evil-doer,"¹⁹ and "He destroys the demonical."²⁰ Hereby, he defines an important attribute of God's Altruistic Will, which directs the world. Guru Nanak at the very outset stated that a spiritual man's (*sachiara*) goal in life is to follow His Will. Consequently, confrontation with evil-doer becomes an inevitable religious duty of man. That is why Guru Nanak stresses that while following the path of love, one may have to sacrifice one's very life, i.e., he quite envisages total sacrifice or martyrdom during one's confrontation with the oppressor, whether an individual or the State. Guru Nanak, thus, laid down for his society the duty, and the responsibility of doing such tasks. Since confrontation with evil-doer would obviously involve the use of force, it is Guru Nanak who rejected the cant of vegetarianism and pacifism under all circumstances. As political oppression is always done by the rulers, they can be opposed only by a committed society. Again, it is Guru Nanak who started the creation of a society, and directed his successor not to be a quietist because he had to lead a Panth.

Thus, Guru Nanak clearly contemplates confrontation with the oppressor by a spiritual person or by a religiously committed society. It is very significant that Sant Ramdas of Maharashtra questioned the Sixth Nanak as to how he reconciled his role as a warrior with his being the successor of Guru Nanak. For a votary of a pacifist and a salvation religion it was natural to misunderstand Guru Nanak's religion. But, for a follower of a whole-life or *miri-piri* system, the role

the Sixth Master took up, was logical and necessary. This is also evident from the cryptic reply the Guru gave, "Guru Nanak had given up *may a* or wealth, but not the world. My sword is for the destruction of the tyrant and the protection of the weak."¹ For the Guru says, "God showers His Grace where the weak are helped."²²

Guru Nanak not only gave us the gift of a complete and profound ideology, but he also clearly detailed and defined its value system, and laid down, *inter alia*, three new values, namely, equality of women, the necessity of work-production-sharing and the responsibility of confrontation with injustice, as integral parts of a whole-life system.

THE THIRD GIFT - An Authentic Scripture:

If we look back on the prophetic history of man, we do not find any prophet who defined his ideology so meticulously, and recorded it in a written scripture. In fact, many of the controversies and disputes about the interpretation of different ideologies, are due to the concerned scriptures having been man-made, recorded by the followers decades or even centuries after the demise of the prophet of the system. This is the third invaluable gift of the Guru. For, no dispute can now be raised about the ideology of the Guru. The Guru has not only embodied it in a volume, but has also given it the status of Guru, and, in fact, of the "Revelation of God" or "*Dhur-ki-Bani*" The most important result of this unparalleled gift is that we have an authentic and comprehensive Scripture, which is a touch-stone to test the veracity of any other writing, system, view, value, principle or idea. The Guru has given us an unchallengeable instrument to find out whether or not any thing is false, spurious or true. No religious system possesses such an unfailing system of sifting authentic from the fake. In other systems interminable debates about what is true canon and what is false, are still going on. For example, while St. Augustine, the great theologian of Christianity, says the 'City of God' and the 'City of Man' are separate, and the former is unconcerned with progress in the world of man, Father Camilo Torres says, "The Catholic who is not a revolutionary is living in mortal Sin."²³ Father Torres, a revolutionary, was shot dead in 1966. As to what is true Christology of Christ, is still being discussed and debated. Following such controversies in some Western systems, some pseudo-scholars in their anxiety to ape the West, tend to import controversial versions of other scriptures in

the field of Sikh hermeneutics. But, because of the Guru's gift their position is untenable.

THE FOURTH GIFT - Demonstration & Interpretation:

The fourth gift of Guru Nanak is indeed, unique and can never be equalled. It is the gift that he lived here with us for 240 years, and demonstrated the interpretation of his ideology in response to all manners of social, religious and political challenges and environments. That Guru Nanak lived for over two centuries, is not a fiction raised by us. It is a theological concept which stands stated by the Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib. Not only did all the Gurus call themselves Nanak, but Guru Nanak, when he appointed Bhai Lehna as his successor, changed his name to Angad, meaning and proclaiming thereby that he was spiritually his part or limb, and not different in any respect.²⁴ Thus, this concept of unity of ideology and spirit of all the Gurus stands particularly stressed by the Gurus themselves. Although the spiritual ideology was completely laid down by Guru Nanak, yet human frailties being unlimited, and the game of love, as envisaged by the Guru, being a most perilous spiritual path, which could exhaust the energies of even the brave and the spiritually committed, the Gurus wanted to tell us how to live a truly religious life in accordance with the Will of God. They showed by their personal life how to react against every socio-political challenge and encroachment on the rights of man. Guru Nanak taught us that life is an unending challenge to the spiritual man. He demonstrated how in a whole-life or *miri-piri* system those challenges from the social and political fields have to be met. For over a hundred years the Guru wielded the sword, whenever he felt the political circumstances warranted such a response from a spiritual man. In fact, the Gurus lived during long periods of chaos and disorder and oppression, and some of comparative peace. They faced all kinds of socio-political challenges and problems, and demonstrated how their spiritual system should react to those encroachments on the rights of the individuals and the society. Guru Nanak explains that in this world of *manmukhs*, challenges will continue, and the spiritual man will have to make preparations, organisation, struggle and sacrifices. It is a significant proof of the unity of ideology that when Guru Nanak laid down his ideology of love, he wanted the seeker to be prepared for the sacrifice of his head, and later in 1699, the same demand for total sacrifice was made by the Tenth Nanak, when he wanted to test whether his Sikhs were

fit to be administered *Amrit*.

The conclusion is that the ideology of Guru Nanak during the 240 years of his life was the same. He demonstrated with utmost precision how a person following his ideology should live, work, organise, face and confront all kinds of challenges, personal and societal, from the socio-political environment and the state. He has left his followers with a crystal clear interpretation of his ideology, which is in tune with God's Will. This unlimited treasure of truthful guidelines is the rich heritage he has left us. This brings us to the very important theory of Sikh epistemology. The Para below explains it.

The Gurus say that the only way to have a consciousness of His Presence is by partaking in His Creative Activity, because He is God of Will, Attributes and Grace. Creative Love is His chief attribute. There is nothing like knowing God. In the case of the Ever-Creative God, to carry out His Will is the only way to know Him, for, to know His Will is to carry it out. This is the greatest fundamental principle of Sikhism. In God's creative movement, deed is knowledge, and knowledge is deed; one cannot be divorced from the other. That is why Guru Nanak asks the question, "How to be a truthful being?" And replies, "By carrying out His Will." "Wonderful is His Will. If one walks according to His Will, then one knows how to lead a life of truth." Again he says, "One who knows His Will, carries it out." He neither poses the question of knowing God nor replies to it. Such a question is deemed to be mere sophistry. Again, the same idea is stressed by Guru Nanak when he lays down that, "Living truth is higher than truth," or merely knowing truth as an idea. The very idea of knowledge is static and deterministic. It has no relevance to a Dynamic and Free Being who is not an object in the empirical world. The world being a creative movement, the only true existence is to participate freely and creatively in its expression. This is also the reason that while God and *Naam* are synonymous, the main emphasis in Guru Granth Sahib is on union with *Naam*, the Creative Immanence of God.¹²⁵

Thus, Guru Nanak lays down a new system of epistemology. That is why in his system, activity and deeds are most important to know God. For God is not an object of knowledge. That is also why Guru Nanak lived for 240 years, to demonstrate in flesh, blood and deed how to live a spiritual life. It is, therefore, essential to understand the significance of his doing the most un-common act of living '

for 240 years. This no other prophet had done. One marvels at his vision. He fully understood the foibles, the weaknesses and the perversities of human nature. For these reasons, he demonstrated how the reactions of a spiritual person or the Sikh Society should be to various social and political problems and to injustice and oppression in the socio-political environment.

In this context, it is also relevant to indicate briefly the achievements Guru Nanak was able to make. Prophets of whole-life systems invariably seek to change the religious ethos of the people. Because, while the prophets can be in the world for a short time, it is ultimately the religious society that has, over time, to respond to the problems of man.

On the first issue of otherworldliness, the Sikh response has been clear. Asceticism and withdrawal have never been accepted in the Sikh society. Baba Sri Chand, son of Guru Nanak, was a recluse and was, therefore, not selected to succeed Guru Nanak. Later, while any one of any caste or standing could join the Sikh society, recluses were the only group who, because of their otherworldliness, were not entertained.

On the second issue of equality, it is a major achievement of the Sikh society that in the caste-ridden and caste-bound Indian society, it is only the Sikhs who threw up leaders like Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Jassa Singh Ramgarhia, Kapur Singh and Ranjit Singh who belonged to the lowest strata of the old Indian society. In no other part or section of India could such persons of the humblest strata be accepted as undisputed leaders. In 1947, after Indian Independence, the Prime Minister and every Chief Minister in India were Brahmins. On the third issue, of the work habit and production, the capacity and zeal for work of the Sikhs, has become proverbial. It is well known that the technology and wherewithals of the Green Revolution were available to peasants all over Asia. But, it became a success only in the Punjab; and now the Punjab alone contributes sixty percent of the food to the Central Reserve for distribution in deficit states. And, one of the reasons for this marvel is the elimination of the Zamindari or feudal system and the distribution of land among the peasants by Banda.

Lastly, there is the issue of ending oppression and bringing about peace in the area. For almost a millenium, the North-West of

India had become an open gate through which wave after wave of invaders came for plunder and taking away slaves. It was the Sikh society that succeeded in sealing that gate once and for all, and bringing about peace in the land. This is what Gardiner writes, "The Maharaja was indeed one of those masterminds, which only require opportunity to change the face of the Punjab. The Punjab was not the same, semi-starving, terrified, looted by the rulers and poorly clothed during his reign. It was a prosperous, homogeneous and peaceful state with all communities, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, fully satisfied partners in the government, in military and civil administration, and it was the happiest state communally in Asia. The Maharaja visited Hindu, Sikh and Muslim places of pilgrimage. It was the only state in India which was the most prosperous, the most flourishing and the most contented."²⁶ This peace, unity and prosperity was the result of the new ethos created by the Gurus. Under the later Moghal administration Sikhs were sought to be destroyed to a man, and a price was put on every Sikh head. And, is it not a marvel of the ethos the Gurus created that when Sikhs got political power, they never thought of revenge or conversion, and shared with the Muslims all power in civil and military administrations? And, it is the result of this ethos, that in the Anglo-Sikh wars Muslims fought with the same zeal and loyalty to the self-rule in Punjab, as any Sikh. During his entire rule of four decades, Ranjit Singh did not execute a single person, not even those who had made murderous assaults on him. Not even a remote parallel is available in the world history of an erst-while adversary community as a whole having been treated in this manner.

Evidently, all this is due to the gift of demonstration and training Guru Nanak gave to his followers for 240 years. For, on no other ground can we understand the phenomenon of Ten Masters, and the closing of succession with the Guru Granth Sahib after the creation of the Khalsa.

THE FIFTH GIFT - Universalism & Oecumenicalism:

Fifth, is the gift of Guru Nanak Dev/z in giving us an universal religion with an oecumenical approach. No prophet in the world has done that. The Gurus did not create a chosen community, or an elect society. Nor did they raise the concept of the last prophet. On the other hand, it is Guru Nanak who says that he is in search of God-conscious beings, so that in co-operation with them he can ferry men across the sea of life.²⁷ Later, the Third Nanak prays, "The world is

burning, I Pray, O God, save it by any means you may be Graceful enough to do,²⁸ Both these hymns, eliminate all religious exclusivism, and besides proclaiming universalism, cast a duty on the Sikhs to co-operate with other religions in order to work for the spiritual progress of man. Of course, it is a progress as understood and explained by the Guru in his period of 240 years. It is evidently for this reason that the Fifth Nanak included the hymns of Hindu and Muslim saints in the Guru Granth Sahib, and got the Muslim saint of Lahore, Mian Mir, to lay the foundation stone of the Golden Temple. Another Muslim saint, Pir Budhu Shah sacrificed two of his sons while fighting for the Tenth Guru during his battles.²⁹

Thus, universalism or oecumenicalism is another hallmark of Guru Nanak's system. It is the fifth gift that Guru Nanak proclaimed, practised, and gave us.

CONCLUSION:

We have endeavoured to indicate a few of the uncommon important gifts Guru Nanak gave to the world. Undoubtedly, these gifts are unique in the Indian context, and except for the whole-life character of Judaism and Islam, even in the entire world. In fact, in the religious history of man no prophet has so radically changed the goal, the methodology and values of earlier religious traditions, as has been done by Guru Nanak. The changes the Guru made, could not be conceived as a result of pure rationality or pragmatism. They could only be revelatory in character and spiritually experienced. That is why they were pursued and practised with super-human faith and conviction which could never be exhibited in the normal historical course, or be devised rationally.

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BE COMPLETE

They (Sikhs) shall wield sword. I shall make sparrows tear hawks. Whoever is ray Sikh, shall not be without hair and sword. Without hair and weapons, man is incomplete, only half a man. Man is complete only with hair and weapons.

Guru Gobind Singh (From Parchian Sewa Das, Episode No. 18)